CHAPTER V

THE BIRTH-RATE

(1) HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

UNTIL recently it was assumed that the Jews multiplied very quickly, indeed quicker than other nations. Even ancient writers were unanimous in emphasizing their great fertility. Tacitus referred to it as a characteristic feature of the Jews, while Hecataeus of Abdera (190 B.C.), who became acquainted with them in Egypt, wrote that, in contrast to the Greeks and other nations, and in conformity with the prescripts of their own religion, they brought up all their children, attaining thereby considerable numbers. In fact, the natural increase of the Jews in ancient times must have been very considerable, or Judaea could not have sent forth millions of emigrants into all the countries of the Near East.

In the Middle Ages the Jews suffered enormous losses through persecutions, expulsions, and conversions, through a high mortality in the unhygienic ghettos, and the uncertainty of their legal and economic position. The birth-rate was very high, but so was infantile mortality; many women bore ten and more children, but seldom did half of them

survive childhood. Also the adult death-rate was high. Acclimatization to Europe and residence in ghettos claimed a heavy toll of lives among the Jews; millions died of diseases unknown in the Near East, or which take there an easy course, but are serious in Europe.

No reliable data are available concerning Jewish vital statistics during the earlier centuries, but certain deductions can be drawn from the corresponding figures for the